

Chamberlain Memorial Remarks

Bob Birge

I will speak today as Owen's brother-in-law. Others have spoken of his scientific accomplishments. I will give a series of vignettes, some of which you have already heard.

Owen was born in San Francisco in August 1920. His father was a radiologist at the Stanford Medical School, then in San Francisco, when in about 1930 he was invited to head up the Radiology department at Temple Medical school in Philadelphia. The locals there wondered why someone had to be brought from the wild West for the position. Owen's mother loved living in California and so she made a bargain that in exchange for moving East, they would spend every other summer in California, and the alternate year in Europe. This worked fine until the second world war when they couldn't travel. Some years later, she was taking a group of women around Philadelphia looking at some of the famous old houses, and one of the women asked her how long she had been visiting Philadelphia. She answered, "25 years!"

In 1943 I was working six days a week on the crew of the 60" cyclotron in the Crocker Lab on the campus and was also a part time undergraduate student. Owen, as one of Segrè's graduate students, was doing experiments with highly radioactive material produced by us on the cyclotron. Later I learned that Owen had accidentally dropped and broken a glass vial full of the stuff, along with the nation's supply of heavy water, spilling a large amount on his foot.

Three years later, in 1946, I met his sister Ann, at a newcomers' dance for graduate students of Harvard and Radcliffe. I discovered that she was born in California and that not only had her brother Owen been working in the Crocker Lab during the war, but so had two of her cousins. I had known both of them but didn't know that any of them were related. At one point 20 years later, the Chamberlains were ubiquitous at Cal. Owen was in the Department, Ann was working in the Donner Lab, their cousin Bill Chamberlain was an engineer in the Radiation Lab. and their father was a consultant for the summer in the UC Medical School in San Francisco.

The first time I really met Owen was when I married his sister in Philadelphia in 1948. It was then that I first met his wife Babette and their 3-year old daughter, Karen, who was the flower girl at our wedding. I also learned that Owen too had been at Los Alamos during the war, but I hadn't met him there as I had been working in a different part of the Lab, and only arrived there in the spring of 1945.

After the war, Owen went to Chicago to get his PhD with Fermi and then came to Berkeley in 1948. I came back to the Rad Lab (as it was then called) in 1950. Because there were so many Chamberlain cousins living in the Bay Area at the time, Babette and I, being the outsiders, were always put together at the end of the table at family parties.

Owen's paternal grandparents built a one room cabin with a bathroom and kitchen in about 1912 on the Truckee River a mile from where the Squaw Valley road now enters the highway. In 1940 a bedroom and 2 extra baths were added and I believe Owen helped build that addition. We often spent time there in the summer with Owen and his family. Because the cabin had only the one bedroom, most people usually slept outside. It wasn't until 1948 that electricity was brought to the cabin.

In 1954 we were spending a weekend in Owen and Babette's house in Berkeley, baby-sitting Owen's first 3 children a couple of days after we had learned that Ann was pregnant with our first child. When Owen and Babette returned, they asked us if the experience of baby sitting cured us of ever having children, and our only answer was, "Not three at once!"

In the spring of 1957, seven years after their third child was born, we got a desperate phone call from Babette saying, "What shall I do, I'm pregnant and we're going to Rome on Sabbatical." We just said, "Have the baby in Rome", and so the baby was born near the Pia gate, and they named her Pia.

In the seventies I was the head of the Physics Division at LBL and had control over the budgets in the Division. Whenever we were at a party with Owen, he would introduce me to his friends as his boss. One day Owen came into the office and said he wanted to hire a new secretary. I asked the usual questions and it came out that the person he had in mind couldn't type! Because he was sure his choice was correct, and not, I hasten to add, because he was my brother-in-law, I agreed. Owen's judgment proved to be absolutely correct because that secretary was Jeannie Miller who worked for him the rest of his career.

As many of you know, Owen always had his desk covered with papers and books. There came a time when the Oakland office of the Department of Energy was replacing old wooden furniture with new modular furniture, throwing out vast quantities of the old stuff. My assistant, Wes Weber, and I went down to Oakland and found a monstrosity large old wooden desk twice as big as Owen's current one, and brought it back to the lab for Owen. It soon became piled high with papers just as before.

One summer day some years ago, when Owen was sitting beside our pool, Ann asked him about a red spot on his big toe. It turned out to be a Melanoma skin cancer. Whether this was caused by the radioactive spill years before or not was never known. The only possible treatment was to amputate the toe. Owen did not discuss his health with us much and we didn't discover that he had Parkinson's disease for several years. It was one night at a social function in San Francisco that I asked his doctor, a friend of mine, why Owen was so tired-looking and walked strangely. He said that it was not surprising since Owen had Parkinson's! The doctor obviously assumed that I knew.

After Owen's second wife June, died, he was not getting on well alone, before Senta came into his life. Her support and care of Owen during his last years enabled him to attend many functions both on and off campus which he would otherwise have missed. These stimulating occasions as well as sharing her home with him made all the difference to Owen's quality of life in his last years.

I want to thank my wife, Elizabeth, for help in editing these words.